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ABSTRACT

A framework used in business training for assessing workplace performance problems and suggesting solutions is a useful tool for providers of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) workplace language programs to determine what they can and can not provide, and how to provide services cost-effectively. The first step is to determine the performance discrepancy (difference between what is being done and what should be done) and whether it results from skill deficiency. If a skill deficiency exists, it should be decided whether (1) the worker could perform the task in the past, (2) the skill is used often, (3) there is a simpler solution, and (4) the worker has the ability to do the task. When a skill deficiency does not exist, assessment should focus on whether (1) the desired performance is punishing in some way, (2) there are obstacles to performing, (3) performance is valued. At this point, one or more solutions may have been identified, and the final step is to determine which is most feasible within that context. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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PAIE Project in Adult Immigrant Education

Digest

Assessing Workplace Performance Problems: A Checklist

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PAIE Project in Adult Immigrant Education
Digest
May 1996

Assessing Workplace Performance Problems: A Checklist

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Diminishing federal funding for workplace literacy instruction has underscored the necessity for educators to be accountable to the companies that are now sponsoring instructional programs (Burt & Saccomano, 1995; Hellman & Woolley, 1996). For English as a second language (ESL) programs, the field has developed tools and processes to record, quantify, and evaluate data from interviews, focus groups, workplace observations, and learner assessment, in order to provide what is needed and wanted by a given company, its workers, and its union (Kirby, 1989; Thomas, Grover, Cichon, Bird, & Harns, 1991).

However, service providers must offer training in efficient, thrifty ways. Few companies want to pay for extensive needs assessment. Further, factors such as management and labor dynamics, job structuring, and the length of time needed to become fluent in a second language may work against ESL educators' ability to effect positive change at the workplace (Burt & Saccomano, 1995).

This digest looks at questions developed from a framework (Mager & Pipe, 1984) used in business training departments to assess the nature and relative importance of worker performance problems and to offer solutions. It suggests ways educators can use these questions in determining what they can and cannot promise to deliver and how they can deliver these services in the most practical, least costly manner.

A. There is a performance discrepancy.
1. What is the difference between what is being done and what should be done?
2. Is this difference important?
3. Is it a skill deficiency?

B. Yes, it is a skill deficiency.
4. Could the workers do it in the past?
5. Is the skill used often?
6. Is there a simpler solution?
7. Do the workers have the ability to do the task?

C. No, it is not a skill deficiency.
8. Is the desired performance punishing?
9. Is non-performance rewarding?
10. Does performing really matter to the workers?
11. Are there obstacles to performing?

D. What should I do now?
12. Which solution is best?

Adapted with permission from R.F. Mager & P. Pipe (1984)

The Performance Discrepancy

A performance discrepancy is the difference between what *is* happening and what one *would like* to be happening. The educator brought in to start a program or to improve an existing one will at first hear about the problems that the company hopes will be alleviated (if not eradicated) by training: The battery sorter does not care about the environment; the housekeeper is lazy; and the cafeteria worker does not listen to instructions.

Further questioning by the educator leads to a more accurate description of the specific offending behavior. For example, the battery sorter at the end of a conveyor belt should have been putting recyclable batteries into the bin marked "recycle" and the others into the bin marked "waste." However, he was throwing the batteries into either bin at random. The complaint was about a lack of environmental ethics but the behavior was throwing away usable materials.

Is it important that this behavior be changed?

Educators need to discuss the tangible and intangible costs of the performance discrepancy with clients. *Tangible costs* can be easily measured. A high generation of waste material results in increased disposal costs. How much does it cost a company to lose material it would otherwise be able to recycle? *Intangible* costs are more difficult to measure. What is the cost of decreased motivation? Does it result in a drop in productivity or an increase in absenteeism or turnover on the job? What is the cost of a loss of goodwill or a tarnished image of one's company? Will this lead to lost business?

Making a list of all possible consequences arising from the discrepancy and calculating their cost may be useful. The resulting cost figures can help educators and their clients decide whether or not to proceed with the analysis of the problem. If they proceed and are successful in reducing or eliminating the discrepancy, this list will be concrete evidence that the ESL program has made a difference in the workplace.

Is there a skill deficiency?

After determining that it is important to proceed, the educator next needs to determine whether the discrepancy is due to a skill deficiency. Are workers performing as they are because they simply do not know how to perform correctly? If there is a genuine skill discrepancy, providing training or making some change in the job (or worker) is warranted.

It Is A Skill Deficiency.

Further questioning may reveal that the battery sorter does not need training on how recycling benefits the environment; he has a more basic skill deficiency. He cannot read English at all, much less read and understand the meaning of the words *recycle* and *waste*. Thus, the performance discrepancy is due to a literacy skills deficiency. Addressing this through training will pay off in all areas of his performance where reading is required, for example, in reading safety posters, memos, written instructions, and paychecks.

Could the workers perform the task adequately in the past? Is the skill used often?

Because of the low proficiency and literacy level of many ESL learners in entry-level positions, it is unlikely that the performance discrepancy is due to a lack of practice in a skill once mastered and now seldom used. However, some immigrant workers may be fairly new arrivals, and some of them may be underemployed for their background and training. If it can be ascertained that the

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proficiency needed to perform a task was there in the past and has been temporarily lost due to disuse, providing practice opportunities may raise the skill level. A Vietnamese cafeteria line worker having difficulty understanding oral instructions may have worked with Americans years ago, and now needs some "brush-up" instruction and practice to improve the listening skills needed at the workplace.

Is there a simpler way?

Because a lengthy training program might not be necessary, advisable, or possible, Mager and Pipe suggest asking two more questions to define the problem clearly. First, is there a simpler way? Is it possible to solve the problem by providing some informal training or a job aid, such as a checklist or written instructions?

The housekeeper who is not cleaning the rooms according to standards is not lazy, rather she does not understand or remember the lengthy oral instructions given her the first week on the job. Instead of requiring nonnative speakers of English to remember a long series of instructions or steps, the job can be simplified. Workers can be given a job aid, such as a checklist with simple pictures or photographs, to refer to whenever necessary. Likewise, the battery sorter can be given a limited number of process steps for sorting batteries. All batteries before a given date can be tossed out and the worker will be instructed to look at the last two numbers of the date to determine this.

Does the worker "have what it takes" to do the job?

The other aspect to consider is whether the worker has the educational background to perform as necessary. Becoming proficient in English takes more than the 40-60 hours offered in the standard workplace class (Burt & Saccomano, 1995). If battery sorters must be able to read extensively to understand the listed chemical compounds, the job may be too difficult for non-literate workers, and the allotted instructional time may not be adequate to prepare workers for this task. The educator may recommend that this task be reassigned to a worker with higher literacy skills.

It Is Not A Skill Deficiency.

In some instances, the problem may *not* be due to lack of skills, as in the case of a workplace ESL class that is experiencing high absenteeism. Workers may not be attending the class because of illness in the family or because of a second job that keeps them from attending classes after hours. This problem can also be examined in light of the Mager and Pipe framework.

Is the desired performance punishing?

There may be incentives for *not* attending classes, even those held during the work day. Workers may receive time and a half for working overtime and when the hotel, production line, or hospital is short-handed, it is expected that those on the floor will work the hours necessary to get the work done. Or, workplace language training programs are too often scheduled during the noon break or after the workers are exhausted from putting in an eight-hour day. This can get in the way of desired performance and result in workers not doing what they would gladly do under other circumstances.

Are there obstacles to performing?

A further problem might be that workers have no opportunity to use newly acquired skills on the job. The supervisors may not support the class or even know which workers are attending. In fact, the supervisors may be giving the message that it is not good for workers to take time off to attend classes, or for workers to even acknowledge that they need to improve their English skills (Jameson, 1996). Because of this, it may be more rewarding for learners *not* to perform as desired.

Does performing matter?

Sometimes workers may not be performing because it simply does not matter to them. In this case, the recommendation is simple. Make it matter. Supervisors need to show they value workers' improved language skills by noticing and taking advantage of these skills on the job. Incentives in the form of certificates and cash bonuses might also be provided to motivate workers to complete the classes.

What Should I Do Now?

At this point in the analysis procedure, one or more possible solutions for the performance discrepancy have probably been identified. Each solution should be evaluated to determine which is the most feasible in each specific situation for each specific workplace. Simplifying the work directions, both written and oral, might be preferable to providing many hours of instruction. Recommending that another worker do the job may be the answer. Making frontline managers part of the process by meeting with them regularly may ensure their willingness to allow workers to attend classes during work hours and may prevent scheduling classes that workers cannot attend.

Conclusion

The Mager and Pipe framework can be a useful tool for workplace ESL educators. Its broad perspective can assist in initial analysis of learner and company or union needs and in the ongoing and follow-up assessment of training program effectiveness, allowing educators to plan, implement, and evaluate programs. Best of all, it may help workplace ESL educators to make promises that they can keep.

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